The Difficult Art of Giving

By JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER

IF I were to give advice to a young man starting out in life, I should say to him: If you aim for a large, broad-gaged success, do not begin your business career, whether you sell your labor or are an independent producer, with the idea of getting from the world by hook or crook all you can. In the choice of your profession or your business employment, let your first thought be, Where can I fit in so that I may be most effective in the work of the world? Where can I lend a hand in a way most effectively to advance the general interests? Enter life in such a spirit, choose your vocation in that way, and you have taken the first step on the highest road to a large success.

Probably the most generous people in the world are the very poor, who assume one another's burdens in the crises that come so often to the hard pressed. The mother in the tenement falls ill, and the neighbor in the next room assumes her burdens. The father loses his work, and neighbors supply food to his children from their own scanty store. How often one hears of cases where the orphans are taken over and brought up by the poor friend whose benefaction means great additional hardship! This sort of genuine service makes the most princely gift from superabundance look insignificant indeed.

I have always been thankful that I was taught early to give systematically of money that I had earned. It is a good thing to lead children to realize the importance of their obligations to others; but, I confess, it is increasingly difficult, for what were luxuries then have become commonplace now. I have always indulged the hope that during my life I should be able to help establish efficiency in giving so that wealth may be of greater use to the present and future generations.

Perhaps just here lies the difference between the gifts of money and of service. The poor meet promptly the misfortunes that confront the home circle and household of the neighbor. The giver of money, if his contribution is to be valuable, must add service in the way of study, and he must help to attack and improve underlying conditions.

Great hospitals, conducted by noble and unselfish men and women, are doing wonderful work; but no less important are the achievements in research that reveal hitherto unknown facts about diseases and provide the remedies by which many of them can be relieved or even stamped out.

Help People to Help Themselves

I AM sure we are making wonderful advances in this field of scientific giving. All over the world the need of dealing with the questions of philanthropy with something beyond the impulses of emotion is evident, and everywhere help is being given to those heroic men and women who are devoting themselves to the practical and essentially scientific tasks.

If the people can be educated to help themselves, we strike at the root of many of the evils of the world. This is the fundamental thing, and it is worth saying, even if it has been said so often that its truth is lost sight of in its constant repetition.

The only thing that is of lasting benefit to a man is that which he does for himself. Money that comes to him without effort on his part is seldom a benefit and often a curse. That is the principal objection to speculation,—it is not because more lose than gain, though that is true, but it is because those who gain are likely to receive more injury from their success than they would have received from failure. And so with regard to money or other things that are given by one person to another. It is only in the exceptional case that the receiver is really benefited. But, if we can help people to help themselves, there is a permanent blessing conferred.

Men who are studying the problem of disease tell us that it is becoming more and more evident that the forces that conquer sickness are within the body itself, and that it is only when these are reduced below the normal that disease can get a foothold. The way to ward off disease, therefore, is to tone up the body generally; and, when disease has secured a foothold, the way to combat it is to help these natural resisting agencies which are in the body already.

In the same way the failures that a man makes in his life are due almost always to some defect in his personality, some weakness of body, mind or character, will or temperament. The only way to overcome these failings is to build up his personality from within, so that he, by virtue of what is within him, may overcome the weakness that was the cause of the failure.

It is my personal belief that the principal cause for the economic differences between people is their difference in personality, and that it is only as we can assist in the wider distribution of those qualities that go to make up a strong personality that we can assist in the wider distribution of wealth. Under normal conditions the man who is strong in body, in mind, in character, and in will, need never suffer want. But these qualities can never be developed in a man unless by his own efforts, and the most that any other can do for him is, as I have said, to help him to help himself.

I believe in the spirit of combination and coöperation when properly conducted in the world of commercial affairs, on the principle that it helps to reduce waste—and waste is a dissipation of power. I sincerely hope and thoroughly believe that this same principle will eventually prevail in the art of giving as it does in business. It is not merely the tendency of the times, developed by more exacting conditions in industry, but it should make its most effective appeal to the hearts of the people who are striving to do the most good to the largest number.

It may perhaps be pardoned if I set down here some of the fundamental principles that have been at the bottom of all my own plans. I have undertaken no work of any importance for many years that in a general way has not followed out these broad lines, and I believe no really constructive effort can be made in philanthropic work without such a well defined and consecutive purpose.

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WHICH is harder, to make money honestly, or to give it away intelligently and helpfully? John D. Rockefeller, who has made more money and given more than any other man in the world, almost never speaks or writes for publication—which makes this article all the more interesting.

Contributing Intelligently to Human Progress

MY own conversion to the feeling that an organized plan was an absolute necessity came about in this way:

About 1890 I was still following the haphazard fashion of giving here and there as appeals presented themselves. I investigated as I could, and worked myself almost to a nervous breakdown in groping my way, without sufficient guide or chart, through this ever-widening field of philanthropic endeavor. There was then forced upon me the necessity to organize and plan this department of our daily tasks on as distinct lines of progress as we did our business affairs; and I will try to describe the underlying principles we arrived at, and have since followed out, and hope still greatly to extend.

It may be beyond the pale of good taste to speak at all of such a personal subject, —I am not unmindful of this,—but I can make these observations with at least a little better grace because so much of the hard work and hard thinking is done by my family and associates, who devote their lives to it.

Every right-minded man has a philosophy of life, whether he knows it or not. Certainly one's ideal should be to use one's means, both in one's investments and in benefactions, for the advancement of civilization. But the question as to what civilization is and what are the great laws that govern its advance, have been seriously studied. Our investments, not less than gifts, have been directed to such ends as we have thought would tend to produce these results. If you were to go into our office, and ask our committee on benevolence or our committee on investment in what it considers civilization to consist, it would say that it has found in its study that the most convenient analysis of the elements that make for civilization runs about as follows:

1. Progress in the means of subsistence; that is to say, progress in abundance and variety of food supply, clothing, shelter, sanitation, public health, commerce, manufacture, the growth of the public wealth, etc.
2. Progress in government and law; that is to say, in the enactment of laws securing justice and equity to every man, consistent with the largest individual liberty, and the due and orderly enforcement of the same upon all.
3. Progress in literature and language.
4. Progress in science and philosophy.
5. Progress in art and refinement.
6. Progress in morality and religion.

If you were to ask them, as indeed they are very often asked, which of these they regarded as fundamental, they would reply that they would not attempt to answer, that the question was purely an academic one, that all these went hand in hand, but that historically the first of them—namely, progress in means of subsistence—had generally preceded progress in government, in literature, in knowledge, in refinement, and in religion. Though not itself of the highest importance, it is the foundation upon which the whole superstructure of civilization is built, and without which it could not exist.

Accordingly, we have sought, so far as we could, to make investments in such a way as will tend to multiply, to cheapen, and to diffuse as universally as possible the comforts of life. We claim no credit for preferring these lines of investment. We make no sacrifices. These are the lines of largest and surest return. In this particular—namely, in cheapness, ease of acquirement, and universality of means of subsistence—our country easily surpasses that of any other in the world; though we are behind other countries, perhaps, in most of the others.

It may be asked, How is it consistent with the universal diffusion of these blessings that vast sums of money should be in single hands? The reply is, as I see it, that, while men of wealth control great sums of money, they do not and can not use them for themselves. They have indeed the legal title to large properties, and they do control the investment of them; but that is as far as their own relation to them extends or can extend. The money is universally diffused, in the sense that it is kept invested, and it passes into the pay envelop week by week.

No Better Solution in Sight

UP to the present time no scheme has yet presented itself that seems to afford a better method of handling capital than that of individual ownership. We might put our money into the Treasury of the nation and of the various States; but we do not find any promise in the national or State legislatures, viewed from the experience of the past, that the funds would be expended for the general weal more effectively than under the present methods, nor do we find in any of the schemes of socialism a promise that wealth would be more wisely administered for the general good. It is the duty of men of means to maintain the title to their property, and to administer their funds until some man, or body of men, shall rise up capable of administering for the general good the capital of the country better than they themselves can.